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97-E-1

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Leninism with a Human Face:  
National Strategy in Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore

Fundamentals of Statecraft  
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September 13, 1996

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>1997</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1997 to 00-00-1997</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Leninism with a Human Face: National Strategy in Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>12</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## Introduction

Few observers of the newly independent city-state of Singapore in 1965 would have guessed that it was to become one of the greatest economic success stories of the latter half of the 20th century. Though blessed with a key position astride a major world trading route, it appeared to be increasingly isolated within the region, both politically and economically. Indeed, with serious social problems of its own on the horizon, the country was as much a candidate for domestic disintegration as economic take-off.

That Lee Kuan Yew avoided the former and succeeded beyond anyone's dreams in the latter is the ultimate tribute to his political acumen and strategic vision. Like Lenin, who a half century earlier took control of state with serious internal and external vulnerabilities, Lee's priority was internal stability and economic modernization. Like Lenin as well, Lee sought rapid modernization through an ambitious program of economic and social transformation. One final similarity between these two men: possessed of extraordinary confidence in their own policy prescriptions, they were prepared to exhort, cajole and if need be coerce their populace into going along. In a sense, both leaders saw themselves as the vanguard of their -- arguably very different -- revolutions. Why then did Lee succeed where Lenin failed? Although Lenin certainly faced the more daunting task, this paper will argue that a crucial element of Lee's success lay in his more skillful use of scarce resources. In particular, Lee

was strikingly successful in convincing others to direct their resources towards achieving his objectives. Although Lee was not above applying pressure against recalcitrants (in domestic politics), generally his strategies relied more on co-optation than coercion.

### **International Context**

Both the regional and world geopolitical contexts that Singapore faced in the early 1960s were far from favorable. Regionally, most of Singapore's neighbors were beset to varying degrees by political instability: to the east, Indochina was wracked by a civil war, China was in the midst of a tumultuous revolutionary experiment; to the west, Burma and Thailand were far from politically stable; and to the south, the Communist bid for power in Indonesia was in full swing. In short, political instability plagued the region.

Singapore's domestic prospects in 1965 were only marginally better than its neighbors'. Though already boasting considerable skills in regional trading and banking, the country's transformation into a modern economy was still far from complete. In the meantime, many saw its alarmingly-high birth rate and high population density as a ticking time bomb. Much of the economy remained heavily concentrated in small shops and small agriculture, while the modern sector depended heavily on just one employer -- the British navy. The nation's colorful mix of ethnic groups and religions threatened to become a further source of instability, particularly if economic growth faltered. Finally,

the failure that year of the political federation with Malaysia proved a triple blow: economic, as the reimposition of custom barriers closed nearby Malayan markets and put into doubt Singapore's focus on regional economic integration; territorial, as Singapore lost access to new land that could have eased its population density problem, and -- most crucially -- political, as the loss of the federation umbrella forced Singapore to devote valuable time and energy to reconstructing its political identity. Furthermore, though the British naval presence provided protection (for a time) from outright invasion, Lee could only assume that Singapore's geostrategic position astride critical trade routes made it a tempting target for destabilization.

### **Interests and Objectives**

Given the dangers inherent in Singapore's geographic position and the fragility of its internal politics, the nation's leaders naturally focused on a defensive strategy. Their concern was not expansion or power projection, but simply survival in a hostile environment. The attempted merger with Malaya was in this sense a logical attempt to seek shelter within a larger, stronger entity. Lee himself, doubtful of Singapore's viability as an independent state, had fought tenaciously to salvage the federation, and its failure left him severely depressed.<sup>1</sup>

Unhappily consigned to independence, Lee's city-state faced a number of daunting objectives, including

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<sup>1</sup> C M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1988* Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988) 297.

--How to maintain domestic political stability given the unstable regional context, the appeal of Communist ideology to many Chinese youth, and the fragility of its new political institutions? On the positive side, the two-year experiment with the Federation had bought Lee valuable time to reduce the power of the leftist opposition, and the Communists no longer represented an immediate threat to the new government that met in September 1965. Nevertheless, any serious government missteps could easily re-ignite political strife.

--How to modernize the economy, create the economic growth necessary to provide jobs, and improve living conditions for the growing population? Although Singapore had long been a major center in regional trade, the nationalistic tensions of 1965 suggested that Singapore's neighbors might wish to develop their own trade and finance expertise, to the detriment of Singapore's economy. Furthermore, Singapore possessed neither the capital resources nor the technical skills needed to compete in the First World economy. To grow quickly, it would need Western help.

--How to ward off outside aggressors and ensure that regional instability did not disrupt the trade flows so critical to Singapore's economy, despite the fact that Singapore was far too small to project military power beyond its borders? The capacity to resist external attack did become more of an issue with the British withdrawal. For Singapore's trade-based economy, however, the critical issue was now to secure the sea lanes, given its own lack of manpower and financial resources?

## National Strategy and its Implementation

Although Lee's policies have clearly evolved over the years to adjust to his country's changing fortunes, it is possible to distill several key principles that characterized his approach to national strategy. The first is the link between internal and external policy. Singapore's combination of strategic vulnerability and internal instability caused the Lee government to assume something of a siege mentality. The nation could only face the hostile world with confidence if its domestic house was in order, and Lee devoted himself to the latter effort. Though circumstances have clearly evolved since 1965, Lee's tendency to see strategic issues through a domestic prism has endured. Asked by interviewer Fareed Zakaria, for example, about Singapore's harsh treatment of drug users, Lee replied that the U.S. might have the luxury of taking its fight against narcotics overseas, but little Singapore could not. Its only hope of fighting narcotics was to make its domestic defenses impervious to penetration.<sup>2</sup>

A second enduring principle of Leesian national strategy is the emphasis on state leadership. Though, like Reagan, Lee emphasized moral values and lauded the family as the bedrock of social order, he was no social laissez-fairist. Lee was at bottom a social Darwinist who was convinced that his own superior intellect gave him the right and obligation to pursue a broad agenda of social change far more ambitious than anything Reagan

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<sup>2</sup> Fareed Zakaria, 'A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,' *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 73, No.2 (March/April 1994): 112

could have dreamed of. Queried by Zakaria about the role of individual freedom, Lee replied that of course it was important, but that the individual could only properly enjoy freedom within a structure of order provided by the State.<sup>3</sup>

These principles provided the intellectual impetus for an ambitious strategy of social reinvention. Radical change, however, demands firm political control, and Lee was skillful in developing a crisis mentality to strengthen his hand. For example, he used the announcement of the British military pull-out in 1968 to impose drastic restrictions on labor unions. The rationale: in the midst of an "economic crisis", the nation could not afford labor unrest.<sup>4</sup> The crisis eventually passed, but the unions never regained their old independence.

There were two reasons for Lee's over-riding emphasis on social transformation. The first was the belief that a greater sense of Singaporean, as opposed to ethnic, identity was a critical factor in political stability. Accordingly, many programs with ostensibly different goals carried a "unity" twist. For example, the housing modernization program not only improved living standards, but it destroyed traditional neighborhoods, replacing them with large, ethnically-diverse housing projects where the government had no natural competitors for political control.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Zakaria 111

<sup>4</sup> Turnbull 306

<sup>5</sup> James Minchin, *No Man Is An Island* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1990) 250

Secondly, Lee believed that certain changes in cultural habits were so essential for development that they required a strong state hand. Reducing the birth rate, for example, was critical to dealing with land scarcity, and the Lee government devoted substantial carrots and sticks to accomplishing that objective. Lee's passion for creating the model citizen could even border on the obsessive: witness the myriad laws against the public chewing of gum, use of profanity and the like.

At the same time, critical to understanding the success of Lee's political and economic strategy is that he never tried to substitute the state for the family as the essential social unit. He never offered a comprehensive welfare policy, for example, preferring instead that citizens rely on the family unit for emergency support. Most crucially, policies such as encouraging home ownership were used to give families a real stake in the economic boom.<sup>6</sup> The government's success in ensuring that ordinary citizens participated in the larger economic prosperity made it much easier to co-opt them into supporting the rest of the agenda.

Lee's other key priority was economic growth and modernization. Although obviously a priority for its own sake, this too contained elements of foreign policy. All the efforts to protect the polity against external subversion would be for naught if the economy could not deliver jobs. What is striking about Lee's approach to economic growth, however, was his

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<sup>6</sup> Minchin 250

willingness to trade some loss of control in order to attract foreign investment. Unlike most of his Asian contemporaries, Lee opted for an open-door policy toward trade and investment and displayed little of the economic xenophobia that characterized the Japanese and Korean models. Instead, he focused principally on getting the macroeconomic policies right -- infrastructure investment, education, and wage policies. In short, Lee expertly leveraged his limited resources (principally location, his population's relative expertise in trade and its familiarity with Western culture) by implementing policies designed to encourage foreign investment. It is a strategy in striking contrast to the Soviets', and later the Chinese', reliance on self-reliance, i.e. squeezing the peasantry in order to obtain internal investment capital.

Singapore's foreign policy under Lee Kuan Yew flowed naturally from the priority he ascribed to internal modernization. Given the level of regional instability in 1965, one could make a rational argument for devoting far more resources to defense than Lee actually did. Although he did draw on Israeli advice to develop a potent defensive force based on compulsory military service, it is interesting to note that he never attempted to develop the ability to project military power, even in the defense of the regional sea lanes critical to Singapore's economy. Beyond the argument that Singapore was too small to engage in even this limited arms race, one can also argue that it was also far more cost-effective for Singapore to

advance its interests through alliances and balance-of-power strategies. To the former end, he strove to reduce tensions and eventually achieve close cooperation with Indonesia and Malaysia, the two countries with the greatest power to disrupt local shipping lanes. To the latter, Singapore has worked to achieve harmonious relations with all of region's actors, including the ASEAN countries and China. At the same time, it has sought to strengthen the regional balance of power by welcoming the presence of other actors, particularly the U.S. and more recently India. In short, Singapore's foreign policy has been a textbook application of limited resources to achieving substantial objectives.

### **Conclusion**

Lee's success in transforming Singapore into an economic powerhouse, enhancing political stability, while maintaining (and perhaps even increasing) social cohesion is an extraordinary combination of achievements by any measure. Indeed, in this century, only Lenin and his disciples have even attempted a similar feat -- only to see their very success in social and political transformation lay the seeds of economic collapse. Why did one succeed where the other failed? In part, one can argue that Lee was the shrewder analyst of his environment, knowing that for all his ability to outmaneuver and occasionally intimidate his political competitors, his ambitious plans ultimately depended upon the cooperation of other forces. Driven by ideology, Lenin (and particularly his successors) strove to

obtain resources by coercion; the result, however, was passivity at home and hostility abroad. Lee, in contrast, followed policies that encouraged both his own citizens and the investment world to "buy-in"

Indeed, his success calls into question certain accepted wisdoms of Western political thought. Many political observers argue that one cannot legislate social values, nor can a modern, information-rich society be constructed on the foundation of rigid political control. Has Lee succeeded in solving these political riddles? Perhaps not. For one thing, although Lee's Singapore has been run with a firm hand, it has never been totalitarian. Some political dissent -- a certain degree of pluralism -- has always been a part of the equation.

At the same time, it is hard to know what price in political maturity the city-state has paid for Lee's version of political stability. One of the key tests of any political system is its ability to provide a mechanism for the stable transfer of power. For all their weaknesses, the Western democracies that Lee often compares unfavorably to his "Asian model" are well-tested in this regard. It remains to be seen if Singapore will prove equal to this future challenge or whether the country will ultimately find that, when the time of transition finally does arrive, it is not yet politically mature enough to manage it.

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